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Jews in the Gym: Judaism, Sports, and Athletics Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon (review)

Gideon Reuveni

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Atrocity: September 11 through the Holocaust Lens,” address the subject explicitly. Kramer uses an historical approach to show how and why the real-life Schindler’s story failed to make it to the silver screen until *Schindler’s List* (1993). Sterritt takes a more theoretical approach, asking provocative questions about the aesthetics (and ethics) of representing the unthinkable.

Two of the strongest contributions to *Hollywood’s Chosen People* consider films of more recent vintage. Lucy Fischer’s “David Mamet’s *Homicide: In or Out*” offers a thorough close-reading of a film by Jewish writer-director David Mamet, reconsidering the 1991 crime drama in the context of Mamet’s nonfiction writing on Jewishness and antisemitism in *The Wicked Son* (2006). Vincent Brook explores how the screen personas of Adam Sandler and Ben Stiller both critique and perpetuate earlier stereotypes of Jewish masculinity. In Fischer and Brook’s chapters, we begin to see the increased complexity of Jewish representation for contemporary, postmodern Jewish artists and audiences.

The final two chapters focus on iconic Jewish stars. Murray Pomerance uses Jerry Lewis and his performance in *The Nutty Professor* (1963) as the jumping off point for a disarmingly personal exploration of the significance Jewish stars have for Jewish spectators. Similarly, Vivian Sobchack begins with “a troubling question: Why do so many people in our culture (Jews and non-Jews alike) *hate* Barbra Streisand?” (211). The investigation of this question leads Sobchack to confront her own identity as a Jewish woman and the ways that “Streisand’s existence instead of signifying freedom questions the possibility of it” (227). This provocative coda to the book reminds us that the creations of Jewish movie-makers don’t just reflect the Jewish experience; they play a powerful role in constructing it.

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JEW IN THE GYM: JUDAISM, SPORTS, AND ATHLETICS

Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2012.

In an opening scene in the satirical comedy film *Airplane*, one of the passengers asks for something light to read. Without much hesitation the stewardess replies: “How about this leaflet, Famous Jewish Sports Legends?” While it might well be the case that the number of Jewish sport legends did not significantly increase since the release of the film in 1980, over the last couple of years we are witnessing a burst of publications on the topic of Jews and

sport. This volume thus corroborates a recent trend in research. Exploring sporting activities from the period of King Herod to Omri Casspi, the first Israeli player in the NBA, the range of disciplinary approaches and scope of topics dealt with in this volume is vast and it is difficult at time to find a common thread that pervades all fourteen essays of this collection. The articles vary in their length, structure, and meticulousness. For the sake of consistency, in my view, a thematic division and more textual uniformity would have strengthened the volume's coherence and sense of continuity. Given the multiplicity of topics, an index would have assisted readers to find their way around the text. Many of the essays deal with the question of integration as well as representation. Organizing the book around these categories is one option of how to format *Jews in the Gym*.

What is then new and innovative about *Jews in the Gym*, as Leonard Greenspoon notes in his introductory comments, that hasn't been already covered in previous research? Beyond filling some research gaps and adding information about Jewish involvement in various physical activities, one of the volume's main contributions is its focus on the complex interplay between Judaism and sport; an aspect that is frequently overlooked in research on Jewish sports in Europe.

The volume commences with an essay on Jewish attitudes towards sports and spectacle during the Second Temple period. Based on a diverse body of sources, Loren Spielman shows how Jewish attitudes to sports during this period implied that Jews were more integrated in their Hellenistic environment than previously assumed. Spielman's article devotes lengthy sections to the question of Jewish spectatorship, a topic that has not previously received much study. Moving from the Second Temple period to the twenty-first century, Ori Soltes explores, in his contribution, representations of sporting Jews in graphic novels alluding to the importance of physical exercise as a vehicle of integration and a medium that helped Jews hold positive images of their bodies. Representation is also the topic of the third essay in the volume. Nathan Abrams provides a concise analysis of the ways in which the Jews and their bodies are represented as "almost the same" in films such as the 1984 British drama *Chariots of Fire*.

Steven Riekens seeks to answer the question "is life a game?" Based on a close reading of Maurice Samuel's almost forgotten book *The Gentleman and the Jew*, Riekens qualifies the argument regarding the incompatibility between competitive sport and Judaism. He suggests that the Jewish faith is not an ascetic religion but a way of life that advocates enjoyment and rec-

reation. The complex relationship between Judaism and sports is further explored in Danny Rosenberg's study of Jewish athletes of faith. Inspired by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's notion of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rosenberg probes the challenges the world of high-performance sports imposes on Orthodox Judaism. He depicts the Jewish athlete of faith as "a rare person who experiences a special kind of loneliness" (95). The difficulties of negotiating the world of faith with the world of sports is also the topic of Ori Soltes second contribution to this volume in which he offers a comparative analysis of the different ways Jews, Muslims, and Evangelicals cope with the tension between their religious convictions and their athletic desires.

Challenges of a different kind of integration are the topics of Steven A. Riess's paper. In his discussion of antisemitism and sport, he argues that while participation in physical activities was expected to provide a path towards securing greater integration, it did not actually promote recognition or facilitate acceptance by the broader society. This finding is corroborated by Mihaly Kalman's meticulous study of Hungarian-Jewish Olympians in the interwar period. Kalman argues that the phenomenal successes of Hungarian Jewish athletes notwithstanding, in the end Jewish difference overshadowed sporting performance.

The political implication of sports is the theme of the next three articles. In their joint paper, William Kornblum, Erin Sodmiak, and Phil Oberlander tell the stories of Jewish wrestlers as a metaphor of the Jewish struggle for recognition. Nina A. Spiegel explores the origins of athleticism in modern Israel in her essay. She demonstrates how physical activity in the form of sport and dance turned the body into a political site where the *Yishuv* "sought to prove to themselves to the world that Jews could indeed be tough and that they were thereby capable of building a nation" (192). Identity politics is also discussed in Jeffrey S. Gurock's paper "Gyms and the Academy." Providing an illuminating account of the development of scholarship on Jews and sports in America, Gurock argues that these writings were characterized by tendencies towards "defensiveness, celebration, and . . . a quest to affirm Jewish identity" (198).

The remaining three articles of the volume are, in my view, the most innovative and enlightening. Linda J. Borish presents a fascinating exploration of basketball for Jewish women—a topic that until very recently was absent from both sport and Jewish historiography. Her study comprises an important addition to our understanding of the historical experience of Jews in the gym. Not the least surprising is Rebecca T. Alpert's study of

Jewish participation in African American baseball. Initially set to study the involvement of Jewish journalists and managers of black baseball teams, she discovered not only individual Jewish players, but an entire Jewish team playing in the “Negro League.” And last, but not least, David J. Leonard provides a sophisticated and thought-provoking analysis of the celebrated arrival of the first Israeli basketball player to the NBA, which he reads as a marker of present day American-Jewish identity with its affinity to Israel and emphasis on whiteness.

Overall *Jews in the Gym* is a splendid addition to recent trends in Jewish historiography. It explores areas of popular culture that until very recently were at the margins of mainstream Jewish Studies, presenting consistently high quality essays on Jews and sports.

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SOLDATEN: ON FIGHTING, KILLING AND DYING. THE SECRET WORLD WAR II TRANSCRIPTS OF GERMAN POWs

By Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer. New York: Knopf, 2012. x + 448 pp.

In an attempt to gather as much intelligence as possible about their enemy during the Second World War, both the United States and Great Britain secretly recorded conversations held by German prisoners of war in Allied captivity. The some 48,000 pages of the latter’s protocols form the basis of historian Sönke Neitzel and psychologist Harald Welzer’s rich, provocative, and readable study of German soldiers and their views of the war. The authors utilize elements of both the historical and psychological disciplines in “reconstructing a particular mentality and arrive at a revised perspective on soldiers’ behavior” (ix), one that significantly downplays the explanatory value of ideology as the primary motivator of soldiers and their actions.

An examination of the transcripts clearly demonstrates that violence served as the most important cornerstone of the soldiers’ experiences. Neitzel and Welzer focus specifically on “autotelic violence”—violence committed for its own sake without any larger purpose” (49). Many of the conversations between German POWs are indeed shocking in their casual and even jovial discussions of violence against civilians. Discussions about pulling Soviet women into armored cars, raping them, and then tossing them out of the vehicle (5) or shooting a Frenchman for his bicycle (151-52) are disturbing in their matter-of-fact tone. For the authors, however,